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## France

## Biotechnology

## 500 to 1,000 ha of GM corn in France in 2005

## 2005

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**Report Highlights:**

The French press revealed on September 6 that 500 to 1,000 hectares of biotech corn are currently under cultivation. While this acreage is virtually insignificant, this revelation was surprising in that it represents a sizeable increase from recent years. A wide range of commentary has ensued. The GOF has delayed the vote of the French biotech law, including EU Directive 2001/18 provisions, which would make declaration of biotech production compulsory, and coexistence rules, for about a year. This proposed law is now expected to be debated by the French Parliament in early 2006. This spate of publicity is likely to give impetus to moving the debate on dossier forward, which would be welcomed by producers and environmentalists alike.

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[FR]

On September 6, 2005, the French popular press announced there are 500 to 1,000 ha of GM corn currently under cultivation in France. This announcement was surprising since French domestic commercial production had ranged from 10 to 35 ha per year since 2000 (see FR5051 dated July 21, 2005). The last year of significant biotech corn production in France was 1998, where 1,500 ha was planted. However, despite the significant increase in biotech corn acreage in 2005, it remains marginal relative to the total area covered by corn in France (1.67 million ha)

### **Comments published in the French Press:**

The conservative daily newspaper *Le Figaro*, usually objective on the benefits of the technology, revealed this information on its cover page in an article entitled "GMOs: corn already planted on a large scale in France." The editorial and a full page in the September 6 newspaper were dedicated to the biotech issue. The other leading French daily newspapers like "*Le Monde*" and "*Les Echos*" as well as the local daily newspaper "*La Depeche du Midi*" carried biotech-oriented stories on subsequent days.

#### *Pro-Biotech Comments:*

In the September 6 issue of "*Le Figaro*," an editorial stated "France needs to choose between the Madrid approach, keeping its rank as a leading agricultural force, and the Berlin approach, being condemned to decline." This alludes to the significant acreage of biotech corn grown in Spain in the past few years (see SP5022, dated July 7, 2005) due to the viable coexistence rules in place, while Germany recently adopted very strict coexistence rules (see GM5027, dated July 15, 2005).

#### *Comments Explaining Why French Farmers are Growing Biotech Corn in 2005:*

An interview of a sociologist in the National Institute of Research in Agronomy (INRA) was published in *Le Figaro* on September 6. He considered it logical that French corn growers planted biotech corn in 2005, given that the EU de facto moratorium was lifted, and that French farmers in regions close to Spain consider as unfair the production of GM corn in Spain and absence of production in France.

An interview with the President of the French Corn Growers Organization (AGPM) published in "*Le Monde*" of September 8 revealed that the current production of biotech corn is based on the conclusions of studies AGPM conducted on biotech and non-biotech coexistence from 2002 to 2004. He indicated that the varieties planted are produced by Monsanto and Pioneer, and are resistant to the corn borer and sesamia. He said the planting seeds were purchased in Spain and the corn will be marketed in Spain. Finally, AGPM President indicated his frustration that the biotech regulatory dossiers have been stuck for a long time in France and hoped the announcement of a significant increase in production in 2005 will push the dossier forward.

#### *Comments on the Lack of Communication from the MinAg:*

On September 8, "*Le Monde*" featured an article titled "The Government hid the existence of commercial GM crops." The article condemned the lack of transparency by the French authorities and was critical about the lack of information from the "Comité de Biovigilance" (monitoring GMOs) on the commercial production of biotech crops. (However, this committee, created in 1999, never really met given the EU de facto moratorium.) "*Le Monde*" also denounced the lack of information on MinAg's biotech website on commercial GMO cultivation. However, there is no regulation requiring the Government of France (GOF) or farmers to publicize on such information.

In "Les Echos" edition of September 7, an article explained that if the GOF did not inform the public of the commercial production of biotech crops in 2005, it is due to France's delay in the transposition into French law of the EU Directive 2001/18, which sets rules for new GMO authorization.

*Anti-Biotech Comments:*

The September 8 issue of "Le Monde" included a vehement reaction from a Député (Representative) locally elected in the region where commercial biotech corn is planted (southwestern France). He described himself shocked that commercial production has started in the absence of responsibility of coexistence regulations. He also condemned the "proliferation, risk and opacity" of the ongoing commercial production of biotech corn. This socialist Député is famous for being strongly anti-biotech and was one of the most vocal members of French Parliamentary working group on biotech last spring (see report FR5030, dated April 18, 2005).

"Le Monde" also published the reaction of the famous anti-biotech activist José Bové. He characterized commercial GM corn grown in France as "outlaw crops."

**Reaction by the French MinAg:**

Pressed by the media to communicate on the issue, the French Ministry of Agriculture (MinAg) published a press communiqué on September 6. In this communiqué, the MinAg explained that the GMO varieties that had been authorized to be commercially grown EU-wide before the imposition of the de facto moratorium of 1999 can be planted in France without additional national authorization, now that the moratorium is lifted. The MinAg insisted that French farmers growing biotech crops are not mandated to inform the public authorities about it.

However, the communiqué indicated that the future national Biotech Law will include a compulsory declaration from farmers growing biotech crop to the public authorities. The communiqué indicated that this Law will be presented by the GOF to the National Assembly for vote in early 2006 and will also include provisions on coexistence. As indicated in an interview last July given by the French Minister of Agriculture (see report FR5054, dated July 28, 2005), the MinAg's communiqué reiterated that France's position on coexistence is to harmonize EU Member States national rules.

The finalization of the French Biotech Law has been delayed more than once (see report FR4057, dated Oct 27, 2005). It was first supposed to be passed in early 2005, then it was delayed because a Parliamentary working group was debating the issues in spring 2005. Rumors indicated that the Law would directly result from the conclusions of the Parliamentary working group (see report FR5030, dated April 18), and would be presented to vote in the fall of 2005.

The MinAg's press communiqué indicated that the voluntarily declared acreage planted to biotech corn was 492.8 ha in 2005. The MinAg backed up the farmers producing these crops, describing the specific segregation measures that were implemented and explaining that these measures were based on studies coordinated by the MinAg on coexistence undertaken since 2003. Finally, the communiqué tried to reassure the public and the industry by indicating that biotech corn produced would be exported to Spain through specific channels.